Despite large scale immigration, particularly in the latter half of the period under study in which considerable portion of the immigrants had settled in the non-plantation areas, there was no significant growth of rural industries or revival of the traditional industries. In fact, the share of rural industries in providing full time occupation in the rural sector had become insignificant in our period under study. For the immigrants, land provided greater opportunities. Even the industrial workers whose contracts had expired preferred to settle in land with agriculture as the primary occupation. Amongst others, lack of technical improvement and close competition were two major factors responsible for the state of underdevelopment of the traditional industries which could not attract labour or capital towards these. As a result by the end of the nineteenth century, the rural economy was sharply divided between the capital intensive plantation sector and the subsistence sector with traditional industries and agriculture.\footnote{This aspect has been discussed by A. Guha, in "Assamese Agrarian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: Roots, Structures and Trends", IESHR, Vol. XVII, No. 1, pp.82-83.} Under the circumstances, lack of income generating avenues from rural industries put tremendous pressure on traditional agriculture, particularly since commercialization in that sector was very limited. However,
in order to understand the extent of underdevelopment, or decay of the industries and its impact on the agricultural sector, we propose to examine the state of the trade and industries closely in this chapter before arriving at any tentative conclusion. Part one of this chapter would deal with the traditional industries - in terms of investigation into the state of technology, composition of the artisanal population engaged in the professions, and the impact of British annexation on them. Particular inquiries would also be made on the extent of penetration of merchant capital in production and distribution. In part II, specific factors relating to the development of industries under the British rule, and the role of the colonial state in this regard are discussed. Nature of private investment, if any, is also discussed in this connection.

Trade and Commerce:

It has been noted generally that there was an increase in the commercial activities in the Brahmaputra Valley districts following British annexation. Rice was noted as being exchanged with other articles from Bhutan and Tibet, and among other agricultural products exported from 18th century onwards prominent were mustard seed, long pepper and ginger. The export of black pepper had declined and long

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pepper, which was a forest product basically, remained as an article of trade till 1840s only. Other than mustard seed, sugarcane and opium had emerged as important cash crops in course of the 19th century, though mustard was the only item exported regularly. With the prohibition of opium cultivation in 1860, the region had also become a major opium importing zone. In our period under study, thus, rice, along with mustard seed and sugarcane, remained the only agricultural item of export of any importance from the Brahmaputra valley which also suffered a great set back as a result of the devastating kala azar epidemic and the earthquake in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

Export of non-agricultural items in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries comprised bamboo wares, silk, elephant tusks and gold which were exchanged for agricultural products of the neighbouring Koch-Hajo areas. Silk, as well as bell-metal and brazen utensils were major items of trade with the neighbouring hills. Demand from Bengal and other Mughal states were mainly for live elephant and agar or aloe wood. Muga silk of the region had market also in the Malabar and Corromandal coasts in the 17th century. The available trade statistics with Bengal for the year 1908-09 showed muga as a leading export item, along
with stick lack, raw cotton, ivory, bell-metal vessels, iron hoes and Indian madder etc. 3

Non-mulbery silk consisting mainly of muga and eri were important export manufactures since the cost of culturing mulbery worms was much higher than that of eri or muga. Besides, muga was also cultivated in Assam, and this "semi domesticated" worm was widely distributed and cultured in the Brahmaputra valley. 4 Lac was mostly exported in the form of shell and stick as well as dye. 5 These were mainly produced on the private lands and were grown by the villagers on two species of figs, planted in a large scale for the purpose in some areas. It was also grown by peasants on farranghati land. 6 Rubber, mostly collected from the forests, was another major article of export to Bengal. Timber was also demanded particularly for its use by the boat builders, and later in manufacturing tea boxes.

It may be noted thus that the principal exports of the valley consisted mainly of raw materials. This also reflects the stagnating condition of the domestic industries in the period. Earlier, although weaving, oil crushing,


5 River-borne Trade of the Province of Assam Ending 31st March 1881 (RTPA), p. 12.

6 Enquiry Committee Report, 1888, p. 22.
basket making, rice pounding and a number of other crafts were carried on primarily within the household, industrial production at the artisanal level too had existed side by side under Ahom patronage. These industries primarily catered to the consumption needs of the royalty and nobility, and to a limited extent, the public. But the civil war in the late eighteenth century, and the Burmese invasion, followed by changes in administration brought about by British acquisition had weakened the base of these industries. The subsequent competition from imported articles left the domestic industries without much hope of recovering. The opening up of the economy thus do not appear to have benefited the indigenous industries until after a century later when parts of the accumulated commercial capital began to be invested in small scale industrial production.

Assam also made a late entry in the wider participation in commercial activities of the region which was partly responsible for the stagnating condition of the domestic industries. By the time commercial transactions fully developed with Bengal, Calcutta had already been established as the most important centre of economic activities in Eastern India with the neighbourhood industries having captured its market wholly. The few industries that languidly survived in the Brahmaputra valley, e.g. textile, metal manufacturing, and to some extent, lac, were not able to get any foothold against competition from their
counterparts in the neighbouring states.

Part I: Traditional Crafts As On The Eve of British Occupation: The Technologies And the Extent of Their Practice

Gold Washing:

It had been recorded by almost all the early travellers that many rivers used to yield gold dust of superior quality in the Valley. The best gold, according to William Robinson, used to be found in the most winding streams, having the strongest currents. The fact that about 4000 tolahs of gold were paid annually to the royal treasury by the Sonowal Paiks (gold washers) does suggest that the industry yielded enough profit to induce the artisans into such a time and labour intensive occupation. There were four different methods of gold washing, and implements used in the process were made either of bamboo or wood; sokali used for digging the sand; leheti, for scraping and depositing sand in the basket; and dorani, a kind of wooden sieve. The working team of sonowals consisted of five persons with four Palis headed by the Pati. There was thus a clear division of work in various stages.

7 W. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, 1841, p. 36.


An empirical study conducted by Capt. Hannay on the per capita productivity of the community of Kachari Sonowals shows that it varied from spot to spot. For example, the vicinity of Tengapanimukh yielded half a tolah of gold per head (worth Rs. 8.00) in a month; whereas the same amount of gold (valued at Rs. 12.00 per tolah)\(^\text{10}\) could be extracted in three months in Noa-Dihing. The per man-day productivity of the other community, viz., Ahom or Bihiya Sonowals was higher than that of the Kachari Sonowals.\(^\text{11}\) However, the working methods of both the communities were equally popular.

According to Shihabuddin Talish the gold thus produced contributed at least ten to twelve thousand tolahs per year to the royal treasury.\(^\text{12}\) 'Buranjis' (the Court Chronicles) and other sources too refer to similar amounts being collected by the Ahom state in addition to the taxes.\(^\text{13}\) Gold came to the treasury from other sources as well. The amount however declined to about 2000 tolahs per annum after the civil war.

\(^{10}\) From 'Capt. Hannay’s Communication to Capt. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in Assam', JASB, vol. 7, pp. 625-28.

\(^{11}\) H. Barbarua, op. cit., p. 457.


\(^{13}\) H. Barbarua, op. cit., p. 458.
Iron Smelting:

Iron ores could be located mostly near brine springs in upper Assam. Similar to gold washing, the working team of iron smelters too consisted of five persons. Four Palis headed by an oja used to start operation near the brine springs around autumn, which then continued for six months. It took four to five days for the five men team to reach the rough surface of the bed of iron. The ore was then washed and cleaned and finally melted in small clay furnaces with the help of two extra persons. Twenty four hours of such work in the furnace used to yield the team about 52 seers of iron. Unlike the gold washers, the iron smelters had to deposit the entire yield to the royal household. On an average six persons engaged in iron smelting took 81 days for producing 100 mds of iron, averaging 4.86 man-days for producing one md of iron (see Table 9.1 below).

14 The price for a seer of iron is referred to have been 1 anna towards the end of Ahom rule. H. Barbarua, op. cit., pp. 464-66.

15 Ibid., p. 466.
Table 9.1
List of persons engaged and the days required for smelting 100 maunds of iron

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Persons required</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Total man-days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Searching the spot</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Digging</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Separating</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Burning the clay</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Melting the lump iron</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Salt Manufacturing:

Brine springs in the valley were mostly concentrated around Borhat and Sadiya in the extreme east and around Namgarh in upper Assam. In a lengthy and laborious method similar to those of gold washing and iron smelting, brine-water used to be extracted from a well close to the brine-springs. These were then processed into lumpy salts by burning wood-fuel in nightly operations. Buchanon Hamilton gives an estimate of salt worth Rs. 40,000 being manufactured in this manner from the brine-springs of Sadiya alone, in 1809. Although of a superior quality, the higher prices of these salts over the Bengal salt made them available to the higher classes of the society only.


Artillery:

Manufacturing of artillery of various kinds and sizes was at its peak during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, unfortunately though, not much information have been recorded regarding these workshops. It is believed that the repeated Ahom-Mughal conflicts had resulted in improved techniques for gun and gunpowder manufacturing in the province. The production was carried on in small scale in different craft-shops or smithies of specific nature - all catering exclusively to the state demand.

Metal Manufacturing:

Brass, bell-metal and copper vessels continued to be manufactured even as late as the 1880s. 'With very few exceptions', observed Gait, 'the articles which are still manufactured in the Assam valley consist of cheap utensils in common daily use, the making of which requires no special skill and on which the cost of freight places imported wares at a disadvantage as compared with those made locally'. Although apparently in greater demand locally, the low level of technology or skill, as referred to by Gait, indicate a lack of improvement in the methods of manufacturing over time. Whereas three quarters of a century before Hamilton had referred to metal casting, that particular branch of skill was no longer used.

19 E.A. Gait, 'Brass and Copper Wares in Assam' 1884 in Notes on Some Industries of Assam from 1884-1895, p.113.
Apart from use in artillery, iron was used for manufacturing smaller articles and procured mostly from the Garo hills for the purpose. There were five groups of goldsmiths (e.g. Raibhagia, Kuwanribhagia, Dewalia Sonari etc.) who were engaged during the Ahom rule for the royal household alone, and six to seven groups of goldsmiths manufactured articles for common consumption. They worked on the supplied metal with very ordinary tools. The more intricate work on enamelling in gold was done in Jorhat by the sunars. While inferior in quality to European standards, these nonetheless involved a fair amount of skill.20

Carpentry:

The carpenters, according to Hamilton, were chiefly employed to construct boats and canoes. They also made coarse bedsteads and chests, implements of agriculture, posts, doors and tools for looms etc.21 Boats or canoes were generally made in the forests on the bank of some streams so that they could be floated down to the places of demand. Though this was particularly so in case of upper Assam, the practice of manufacturing was more or less the same in all parts of the valley. The material used for

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20 The main articles manufactured were Gaiera (necklace): Rs. 80-100; Thuria (ear-rings): around Rs. 140; Keru (smaller ear-rings): Rs. 40; and Biri and Dugdugi (Lockets): ranging from Rs. 5 to Rs. 100, H.Z. Darrah, 1884-85, op. cit., p. 4.

manufacturing these were 'Sal', 'Ajhar', 'Gunsiri' and other evergreen timbers.

The trees for boats and canoes were sold in a roughly hollowed state. After further excavation these were then smeared with mud and put to a steaming process for softening them up. In case of splits the rent was patched with a piece of wood fastened by clamps. The boats manufactured in this process were about 60 ft. in length with a carrying capacity of 30 to 35 tons each.22

Pottery:

Like goldsmiths the Kumars too were divided into five classes according to hierarchy and consumption needs. The material used by the potters was a dark coloured clay which was usually found in the banks of streams. The wheel was used for rough-shaping of all articles except well-rings and flat or saucer-like utensils. There was equal division of labour between men and women of the family in this industry - women mostly seeing through the final shaping and polishing etc. In case of potters without a wheel (e.g. Hira Kumars) even the rough moulding was done by the women.23

The end product was mainly rough in texture. It is obvious that these products could not retain their market-share in

22 An Account of the Province of Assam, Assam Secretariat, Shillong, 1903, p. 47.

23 E.A. Gait, 'Pottery in Assam', in Notes on Some Industries of Assam 1884-95, op. cit., pp. 126-29.
the face of competition from the Bengal pottery as well as the cheap substitutes in brass utensils available at reasonable rates.

Silk:

Sericulture and weaving of silk was carried on for both household consumption purposes as well as for supply to the royalty and nobility of the Ahoms. Some amount of muga silk started being exported to Bengal and beyond around the last quarter of the 18th century.

Out of the four different kinds of silk worms reared in the province, muga, which was reared on the non-mulberry plant, was most common. The insect of this particular variety was fed on the tree as it grew. The total gestation period for a breed was 66 days. According to Robinson, the instruments used for winding the silk was 'the coarsest imaginable'. 24 Implements used for placing the cocoons were made of bamboo and the process involved engagement of two persons; fifty cocoons could be winded off in one thread, although twenty was the usual number. 25 The fact that about 35 years later Hunter quoted Robinson on the method of production, labour, output and the expenses involved in rearing muga, suggests that there was no change in any of

25 Ibid.
these aspects of muga culture even at the end of the nineteenth century. 26

Lac:

Although lac maintained a more or less steady position at the top of the export list, bulk of the lac produced in the province was exported in its natural form, viz. stick lac. The only processing centres were situated in the districts of Kamrup and Sibsagar - both in an insignificant scale. By the turn of the century manufacturing of lac wares was restricted to Sibsagar district alone.

One popular method adopted in processing was that of washing the lac in alkaline water (Khar pani). The preparation of Bhiri Laha or boiled lac involved boiling of the stick lac for some hours until it was softened and formed into cakes. This form of lac retained the whole of the dye. The dye had to be prepared by extracting it from crude or boiled lac and was mainly used for dyeing yarns and clothes. 27 Lac wares were prepared by mixing shell lac with other substances like vermillion, orpiment, indigo, kaival etc. Artistic wares like trays and boxes, and the simpler ones like toys, legs of wooden seats, shuttles, lamp holders


27 The articles usually coloured with lac dye were cotton clothes and thread and other materials of silk like muga, epi etc. B.C. Basu, Note on the Lac Industry of Assam, Agricultural Department, Industrial Series No. 6, 1905, p. 10.
and cylinders of native drums etc. were manufactured in this way. Lac was also used for varnishing over designs printed on wooden surfaces as well as cement to fix metals. 

Amongst other household industries, oil pressing was carried on in the crude method of using two flat boards and a stone-loaded small beam for crushing. There were very few cattle powered mills or ghani used in this period. Sugar used to be processed mostly in the ghani. Rice was pounded manually.

Level of Technology: Production Organisation:

Our discussion so far points quite clearly to the fact that the general level of technology involved in these industries was quite low which underwent very little change in course of the nineteenth century. Abundance of timber and a limited supply of iron may, to some extent, account for the widespread use of wooden or bamboo-made tools used there. Like the rest of eastern India the use of metals was mostly restricted to the shaping of artisanal tools. As a result, the scale of production was limited, particularly in industries like gold washing, iron smelting or salt manufacturing.

As such it is rather difficult to categorise these industries according to levels of production organisation, as in many cases production was carried on in more than one level. Processing of gold, salt, iron or artillery were carried on exclusively within the artisanal castes. Also, since these were not essentially household industries (employing only family labour) they involved fair amount of differentiation in function. However, because most of these industries were state-sponsored under a semi-feudal system of government there was no subsequent development of organisation in marketing of the produce. Despite the dispersed nature of production, brass and bell-metal manufacturing appear to have reached the second level of production where 'dadan' or advance was being practised.

Production of silk was carried on in phases at domestic as well as artisanal levels. Although by 1823 the filature technique of winding silk was replacing the non-filature products in other parts of the country, muga, the leading export of the valley was still at the non-filature stage. Procurement of the material in most cases had to be ensured by advancing money to the artisans.30 Not much information

30 In the primary level of organisation the nature of production is dispersed and essentially within the domestic unit involving minimum division of labour. In the second level of organisation in order to secure regularity of supply and specification of goods the middleman advances cash to the artisan. In the third level expansion of the work group takes place; artisans other than family members are included and more than one middleman mediates in advance in procurement and marketing of the produce. Referred in S. Bhattacharya 'Eastern India', in Dharma Kumar, 1982, pp. 283-84.
is available regarding the production organisation of the carpenters or the boat-builders. With most of the timber being floated down the river Brahmaputra for the already established boat-builders of (then) Eastern Bengal, there was not much scope for an indigenous development of this industry. Blacksmiths, basket makers or the potters carried on their crafts essentially at primary level. Thus if we take technology as the determinant of change in production organisation, none of these appear to have qualified for ushering in any higher form of production organisation.

Part II:

State of the rural industries at the beginning of the 20th century:

The central idea of David Scott, the Commissioner of Assam, in the early years of British administration was utilization of resources of the region. This concerned some of the industries discussed earlier, particularly silk which he believed could command the market once the newer methods of production were introduced. He believed that the export of bulky commodities like rice had no future on a commercial scale because of a difficult river system. Instead, he thought of a substitute plan for encouraging the production of more valued items such as opium, muga and mulberry, keeping in view prospective markets for them in Bengal, China and Europe respectively. This required

31 Ibid.
substantial investment to give the scheme a start. Scott had counted upon the long-term returns, but the lack of response from the Government, followed by his death, put a stop to such schemes. 32

As noted earlier, the production of silk being carried on in small scales, there was not much profit that the local farmers expected to derive from its existing forms. 33 The first step was taken by Scott in 1834 with investment primarily on sericulture. He introduced reelers, reels and plants of 'Morus alba' from Rongpur and established a factory in Darrang with the objective of extending the cultivation of r& or mulberry worms and of improving the reeling of muga worms. However, as Allen observed: 'The practical results of the experiment were slight and nothing more was done to encourage sericulture in Darrang'. 34 After this initial failure it was realized that a change in the nature and speed of production needed an investment of more than a few reels and plants. Between 1834 and 1840, cocoons and threads of muga worm with specimens of the woven cloth were submitted to the Silk Committee of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society for approval, but despite favourable reports the scheme was not successful. Thereafter no

32 T. Hugon, op. cit., p. 23.

33 It has been observed, a farmer in Darrang district received about 38 to 56 per cent of the export value of lac, mustard and muga silk in 1833. A Guha, 1988, op. cit., p. 132.

further experiments were made as 'the difficulty and expenses of procuring the labour required' was reportedly great.

A comparison of the figures of the censuses of 1872 and 1891 shows that in 1891 the number of persons obtaining their livelihood from reeling, spinning and weaving was 1,693 whereas the 1872 census had registered the number of silk weaving castes (including reelers, spinners and cleaners etc.) at 68,685. Even if we leave a considerable number as children below age and dependents, and consider the results of the census as less accurate there seems a great disparity between the two figures. It indicates that in proportion to the persons belonging to the castes of spinners and weavers, the number of persons actually earning their livelihood from the profession was much less. Thus a mere lack of skilled artisans does not seem to be the case here. Perhaps it was the supply of trained labour for an advanced technology which was scarce and expensive in this context.

35 Ibid.
36 Census of India, 1872, Chapter V, pp. cxxxviii-cx1.
37 David Scott had recommended a policy of encouraging technical training in preference to the general education which was turned down by the authority.
Anyway, the small investment on the sericulture programme\textsuperscript{38} was not followed by introduction of filature techniques generally. Without this the silk of the valley had no market prospects because by 1823 the company's raw silk export to Europe had comprised entirely filature wound silk.

As the quality of eri silk was far inferior to pat (mulberry) or muga (non-mulberry), the cloth brought for sale too was much inferior and it remained so till the end of the century despite the fact that its exports outweighed the other two varieties. But as noted by the district heads, even in this branch of silk culture it was 'impossible to obtain any appreciable quantity without a considerable expenditure of time and trouble'.\textsuperscript{39} Hence throughout the period under study eri silk was procured in its crude form for sale mainly in the neighbouring hills.

\textsuperscript{38} The cost of plantation of some 330 acres and of distribution of 500 modern reels was estimated at 12,000 to 15,000 sicca rupees around the 1830s — a small amount in comparison to the revenue earned. A. Guha, 1968, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 136.

\textsuperscript{39} The deputy commissioner of Lakhimpur district estimated that eri clothes worth Rs. 7,000 was purchased annually by the hill tribes to the north and north-east of Sadiya and the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup stated that in that district about 500 mds. of silk were taken in 1898-99 by the Bhutiyas and about 1,500 mds. exported to Bengal and that the price of eri cocoons ranged from Rs. 5 to Rs. 2 in different parts of the district depending on the quality. \textit{Monograph on Silk Clothes of Assam}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 4.
The repercussions of the general policy of promoting British industrial interests after the declaration of the Charter Act of 1833 was reflected on the domestic industries of Assam as well. Nature of silk exported from India changed in 1857 when utilisation of waste silk began in Europe - with it the waste and wild silk trade improved and that in reeled silk declined. Thus when in the 1880s the market value for the region's silk was reconsidered, it was only in cocoons and not even in threads, on the ground that 'the reeling is of rudest character possible', 'the thread is coarse and uneven', 'gouty' and 'knibby', and 'would probably be regarded by the English manufacturer as unfit for employment for any purpose', whereas, 'from the export of cocoons, on the other hand, there may be some hope'.

It was remarked by a manufacturer of silk in England that 'No muga or eri waste cocoons have, as far as I know, ever been sold in London market.... Tussar waste silk, however, is regularly sold in London', though, he held that eri and muga would have been much more valuable. His observations apparently were taken note of, as E. Stack noted, 'although China had hitherto been the principal source of supply, there is no reason why Assam should not contribute large quantities of an article which is produced with so

40 E. Stack, 1884, 'Silk in Assam', in Notes on Some Industries of Assam, 1884-1895, op. cit., p. 3.
much ease in Brahmaputra valley'. He further explained that the demand for waste or thrown silk was assured as it could be used in the production of spun silk. In his view Assam possessed 'superior capabilities' for supplying to a demand of this nature and as such she 'ought to be in a much better position to supply cocoons to the English silk spinners than the principal Tussar producing districts of Bengal'.

However, despite assured demands, these possibilities were not justifiably explored. Although some experiments were done by C.H. Leppers on eri in the Lakhimpur district in 1872-73 — which were reported to be considerably favourable and which held the possibility of improving in size and quality — he refrained from advising Messrs Lister & Co. to take up land for eri culture on the grounds of labour shortage and the process being a costly one. Although some 400 to 500 CWT of eri cocoons were still exported annually from Goalpara to Calcutta for shipment to London, this was very far from representing the full productive capabilities of the Assam valley'.

There was reportedly some revival of the silk industry at the beginning of the 20th century with an increase both in local consumption and export of silk from the province.

41 Ibid, pp. 3-4.
42 Ibid.
which however was not a constant but a fluctuating condition. In 1882-83, the total value of silk exported—both raw and piece—amounted to 205 lakhs which rose to 366 lakhs in 1897-98. In 1906-07, 643 mds. of raw silk were exported out of which the estimated value of piece goods was 2 lakhs of rupees from Lower Assam and about one lakh from Upper Assam.43

Out of the three varieties, eri was considered most important from industrial point of view to be followed by muga and rat silks. Eri was mostly cultured by tribes around north and south Kamrup. The manufactured articles mainly consisted of endi or eri chaddars and thans. Over 30 per cent of the eri cloth produced locally were exported from Assam as against a 20 per cent local consumption. The trade in eri received particular impetus when it found an overseas market in Australia from 1904-05 onwards. But imposition of heavy import duties practically closed the market in Australia only after a couple of years. In the local export better qualities were sent to Calcutta by Marwari wholesale dealers whereas the coarse ones (selling between Rs. 6 and Rs. 12 per than) were mostly brought by hill tribes in the local hats.

Despite the substantial export however, the market in eri was threatened by competition from cheaper fabrics like Banaras endi, Bhagalpur bafta, Bishnupur garvashuti etc. which sold at between Rs. 16 and Rs. 18 as against Rs. 25 or

more of the Assam eri than of 6 or 7 yards, around 1905. Here also the method of spinning which reportedly was most labour-consuming and primitive, was responsible to a large extent for the comparative dearness and inferiority of the fabric concerned. 44

Though superior in quality, muga and pat were considered less important from industrial point of view. For example, as against eri, about 80 per cent of the demand for muga and pat were local and only 20 per cent export. Sibsagar was the great muga growing district of the valley, followed by south-western Mangaldoi and western and central part of Kamrup district. Sualkuchi (Kamrup) and Jorhat (Sibsagar) were the most important weaving centres in the valley at the time, though muga culture was on the decline reportedly at the time. As in case of muga, the decadance of the pat industry too was due to the import of cheaper silk thread from Bengal, China and other foreign countries. 45

From the later reports on the industry, it does not appear that there was any improvement in the general condition of the silk industry. In the Census of 1921, only 490 workers and dependants were recorded as engaged in the rearing of silk worms, out of which 483 were engaged in rearing muga and eri worms, and only 7 in pat worms. This

44 Ibid., pp. 26-27.
45 Ibid., p. 28.
shows that silk worm rearing, at least as the primary occupation, was on the decline. However, it was noted in the Banking Enquiry Report of 1929 that many persons kept it as a subsidiary occupation which the Census figures did not reveal.46

By 1870, Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang had become the chief lac producing and exporting zones in the valley. Export figures indicate that lac was a major item of export in this period. However, the bulk of it was still exported in the crudest form, known as stick lac. The only exception was a few maunds of manufactured lac which were artificially propagated in Kamrup47 and the Sadar subdivisions of Cachar.48 The Deputy Collector of Darrang district reported around 1905 that the lac rearing industry in his district 'was ruined some years ago' by a blight which largely destroyed the insect. Around 1885 several thousands of ficus trees were planted at the foot of the Garo hills in the Goalpara subdivision for lac cultivation, but this was abandoned owing to the spread of the Kala-azar epidemic. Apart from the natural calamities contributing to the failure of lac culture in the valley, there is no other reference to attempts at developing a home industry from this major item of export.

46 APBER, 1929, p. 8.
47 Imperial Gazetteer, Assam, 1906, op. cit., p. 56.
48 B.C. Basu, Note on the Lac Industry of Assam, 1905, p. 36.
The much discussed opium policies of the colonial government almost entirely influenced the state of this industry in the Brahmaputra valley. Cultivation of poppy was first introduced in Assam in 1770. Observations made by Hamilton in 1808 and by M'Cosh in 1837 point to the fact that opium was cultivated extensively in the valley. It grew particularly luxuriantly in most part of western Assam, and it was alleged that about 80 per cent of Assamese population were opium addicts, a fact which drew immediate attention of the British administrators.

The policy proposed by David Scott concerning opium was to invest in purchasing local opium and exporting it on government account. He even urged upon the Company to treat Assam as a special case by allowing her a share in the opium monopoly. However, although cultivation of poppy had increased due to its growing importance as a cash crop, no efforts were made in the subsequent years to standardise the indigenous opium as planned by Scott. Emphasis was rather shifted towards importing opium to the state and selling them at a high price. This, it was assumed, would be instrumental in checking the consumption of opium. The question of restricting and prohibiting cultivation of poppy

49 Hamilton, 1940, op. cit., p. 56 & John M'Cosh, op. cit., p. 36.

too were considered as early as 1840 but a policy of non-interference was decided upon.\textsuperscript{51}

In this phase of 'non-intervention' (1826-1840), however, the government intervention was extended to the spheres of production and distribution of opium when individual cultivation continued side by side with import and sale of Akbari opium. Also featuring prominently were contradictory observations made during this period regarding the impact of such high degree of opium addiction on the population. Whereas, it was observed by 'no less an authority than Sir Benjamin Broodie, that opium eating as compared to spirit drinking, is comparatively harmless, as well socially as to the physical constitution of the person who uses it',\textsuperscript{52} it was also observed by Col. Mathie that 'it is the poorer classes who become emanciated from taking opium as they will often forgo all other kinds of subsistence to obtain it'. The worst affected were the residents of Nowgong, Sibsagar and Mattak districts who were more addicted to kanee than those of Kamrup and Darrang.\textsuperscript{53}


\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Bengal Administrative Report}, 1856-57, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 96.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report}, 1925, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 18.
Although increase in the cultivation of poppy had resulted from a strong demand for cash, it had the undesired effect of making people more addicted to the habit of opium consumption. Besides, this must have also contributed in the shrinkage of overall cultivated acreage in Darrang and Nowgong districts as poppy cultivation was more labour-intensive and profitable as compared to ordinary crops. However, promotion of opium cultivation as an important crash crop was neither lucrative when compared to the excise revenue earned by the import of the item, nor was it to the interest of the tea industry. Thus the next decisive step taken by the administrators was to prohibit the cultivation of opium in the region - but not its consumption. Sale of abkari opium which started in 1851-52 continued as before, but in order to promote the sales further, licences were issued in unrestricted manner to 'respectable persons' without any payment whatsoever.\footnote{Ibid., p. 72.}

In the 1860s, the price charged for opium was Rs. 14 per seer which increased to Rs. 20 per seer in 1862; Rs. 22 in 1866, Rs. 23 in 1873 and Rs. 24 in 1874. In 1872-73, there were as many as 5,137 opium shops (this being almost equal to the number of villages), out of which 867 were located in Nowgong district.\footnote{Ibid.} In the Annual Administrative Report of the Presidency of Bengal, it was noted, 'with the higher prices now fixed and the substitution of Government
opium for the entaxed indigenous drug in Assam, a considerable increase of revenue may be expected from this source,56 which proved to be quite true. The amount collected as opium revenue remained almost half of the total revenue until 1870s. In 1864-65, the opium revenue amounted to Rs. 1,083,642 while the land revenue yielded Rs. 1,001,773 only. The total demand of excise revenue during 1874-75 was Rs. 1,380,613 against Rs. 1,344,909 in 1873-74. This recorded an increase of Rs. 164,404 in comparison with the average annual revenue of the preceding five years - and the increase was mainly under the heads 'Ganja' and 'opium', the two excisable articles most in demand in the province. The share of opium in the total demand for excise revenue constituted Rs. 1,199,446 or 86.87 per cent. District-wise percentages in the total demand for excise revenue in 1874-75 was as follows (Table 9.2).

Table 9.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>24.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>18.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>12.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>7.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khasi Hills</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naga Hills</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>7.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 9.3

The incidence of excise duties per head in the Brahmaputra Valley districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Rs.</th>
<th>As.</th>
<th>Pies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average for Brahmaputra Valley</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average for Surma Valley</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hills</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1-1/4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RAERA, 1874-75, p. 3.

It was noted in the Annual Report on The Administration of Excise Revenue in Assam for 1874-75 that 'In proportion to population, Assam pays a heavy excise revenue and the total amount levied is larger than is paid by the Punjab and any of the local administration immediately under the Government of India'.57 (see Table 9.3). The total quantity of opium consumed throughout the province during the year 1874-75 was 1837 mds and 13 seers. The enormity of this can be understood from the following statement as it was stated to be '100 mds in excess of the quantity of excise opium sold in British Burma, Oudh and North Western Provinces put together and in proportion much more than is consumed in Bengal'.58 The consumption of opium per head of population in each district was as follows (Table 9.4):

57 RAERA, 1874-75, p. 4.
58 Ibid, p. 23.
Table 9.4

Opium Consumption per capita 1874-75

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Consumption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>10 tolahs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>5-1/3 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>3 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>3-1/5 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>1-1/2 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>1/2 &quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ibid.

It was also observed that with the exception of the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong, where the consumption had decreased a little, there was an increase in the quantity of opium sold.

It was observed only later by the Enquiry Committee Report of 1888 that

The prohibition of cultivation of opium in Assam, which dates from the year 1860, and confined consumption to the highly priced Government opium by successive enhancement from Rs. 14 in 1859-60 to Rs. 32 per seer has had the effect of keeping down and of late years even reducing the consumption.

But not only was this decline marginal, it also proved contrary to the anticipations of the educated Assamese expressed in the Assamese monthly 'Arunodoi' that much good would come out of the prohibition of opium cultivation in the region. 60

**Economic Condition of the Artisans: Credit and Marketing Facilities**

The Census of 1921 revealed that only about 2-1/2 per cent of the total population of Assam were supported by industries other than tea, which when contrasted with other provinces, shows how heavily this province depended on agriculture as the primary means of subsistence. Almost all the sources agree on the point that the cottage industries in the province could hardly be said to be flourishing. However, as to the reasons for the poor condition of these industries, different explanations can be traced from the same sources. It was observed by the Banking Enquiry Committee of 1929, "unless the villager has the will to work and the desire to assimilate the teaching he receives, and to put it into practice, the assistance rendered by government is a waste of time and money. This applies not only to weaving but to all cottage industries and subsidiary occupations. For example, we have evidence from reliable witnesses that

60 It was only in the year 1905 that Rs. 7,000 was returned by export of opium., *Imperial Gazetteer, Assam, 1905*, Table VI, Part II, p. 105.
the Assamese consider it too much trouble to rear the muga silkworm. We have been told that it is held to be degrading to rear the muga worm. Others again have given up the crafts that their forefathers practised and taken to agriculture."

Further,

"In so far as laziness and indolence are causes of the decline of the cottage industries, we can only hope that increased pressure on the soil and a continued desire to maintain a higher standard of living which postulates an increase of income, will spur the villager to abandon his slothful habits."

"Innate conservatism" and "failure to adopt improved methods" were greatly attributed to the inability of the Assamese crafts, e.g. weaving or pottery, to withstand competition from imported goods. Referring particularly to the potters, goldsmiths, and workers in iron, brass and bell metal as well as silk worm (pat) rearers, in the third decade of the century (1929), it was observed in this source that the cottage industries were undoubtedly declining, because of a desire on the part of the artisans to attain a higher social status through change of profession.

As against these attributes of laziness, indolence, conservatism or unwillingness etc., however a different picture emerges from the Report on the rural industries of Assam by G.N. Gupta as prepared in 1907-08. He had noted,

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
"The decay of pat industry is reported to be due to the fact that the iugis or katanis who used to be the only castes engaged in the industry are giving it up because they wish to rise in the social scale by giving up what is considered a degrading profession. But I am of opinion that the real cause of the decadance of the industry is due to the import of cheaper silk thread from Bengal, China and other foreign countries.

As in case of the endi, the pat and muga fabrics are in danger of being ousted by cheaper silk fabrics from Benaras, Murshidabad and other places."  

Sualkuchi and Jorhat were the main supplying centres for the exported muga and pat silks. But in this case too the local method of reeling muga not being as efficient as in Malda it could not compete fairly with the latter products. Similarly, the Assam way of spinning endi was reported to have been most labour-consuming and primitive, though, "... there can be no question however, that if endi cocoons could be reeled, there could be a great saving of time and the produce could be sold much cheaper". Contrary to the attributed "failure to adopt improved methods", some of the Barpeta weavers were reported to have adopted drill-weaving method of manufacturing for supplying clothes to the firm Saraswati and Company of Gauhati, who made advances to the weavers for the purpose.

64 Ibid.
As our earlier discussion points out — various experiments in sericulture since 1834 had met with repeated failures which was however more due to absence of expert knowledge in sericulture, as pointed out by G.N. Gupta, rather than any serious lack of initiative on the part of the artisans. The outbreak of disease amongst the worms which, as Gupta held, was common not only to Assam but Bengal and elsewhere as well, could be reduced greatly in the latter by scientific sericulture, but was lacking in case of Assam.

The question of adopting improved methods, e.g. reeling, spinning or weaving in case of silk industry, or other tools in case of other crafts, e.g. pottery or work in gold, iron, brass and bell-metal articles, were more directly related to the economic condition of the weavers and other artisans, as also the facilities of credit and marketing. In case particularly of the silk industry, it was noted that despite competition from outside market, the local products, particularly endi and muga had a good export market. The weavers were however not organised enough, and without financial aid were not able to buy the best yarn or find the most profitable market. Even in 1929, it was only in Palasbari and Sualkuchi in Kamrup district where some organised market for sale of endi and muga cocoon existed. The professional weavers of Sualkuchi could as such have some access to the bazar at Gauhati directly. The weavers of upper Assam had to sell clothes to the local dealers, who in most cases, were Marwari traders.
Marketing and trade in non-agricultural items too were largely in the hands of the Marwari middlemen. It was remarked in the Report of 1829-30 that silk weavers of Assam were not seriously indebted to the middlemen. While stressing the point that it was often the "unwillingness to work" rather than "want of capital" which stood in the way of improving his condition, the Report also noted, "we have, however, evidence of a custom whereby a Marwari advances 5 seers of cocoons to a weaver for making two clothes, one of which will go to the Marwari." 65

The depressed condition and indebtedness of the artisans is however more emphasized in the earlier mentioned Survey of Industries conducted in 1907-08. Earlier sources indicate that by the end of the 19th century, merchant capital had penetrated more or less at all levels of production in silk industry. Within the region too there was considerable movement of raw materials. For example the muga breeders of upper Assam annually imported cocoons from Kamrup for breeding, which they could not undertake without financial aid from the middlemen. Hunter's account of 1879 suggest however that the extent of such advance and aid was limited both in Nowgong and Sibsagar districts. 66 Although demand did not have much impact on supply of the finished products, it did not indicate any superior position of the

65 APEER, pp. 113-14.
producer either in this case. In this the specific demands and overall control of the middlemen over the markets often compelled the producer to sell to the middlemen.

Advances in metal manufacturing followed the basic features of the putting out system. It is noted that the metal workers in Sibsagar district were practically under the obligation of Marwari traders who used to provide the manufactures with the metal, most probably the imported sheets (the River Traffic of Sibsagar district mention figures of imported metals), to the Morias who were engaged in manufacturing of utensils. This was often sold on credit and on the understanding that the manufactured utensils would be sold to them at reduced rates.67

The average earning of a weaver was estimated to be about 1-1/2 to 2 annas per day (1907-08). The weavers of some of the flourishing centres like Sualkuchi where they could buy their own cocoons and sell the products at a much greater profit independent of the mahajans, however, could earn on an average 3 to 4 annas per day. These were mostly for special kinds of weaving where no, or less number of middlemen were involved in marketing the produce. The average weaver (about 80 per cent) were said to have been in a "very depressed condition" and completely in the hands of the Kayah mahajan. As the Report of 1829-30 noted, "It generally took a family for seers 2-1/2 about six months to spin the thread and do the weaving of a than, and

67 Notes on Some Industries of Assam, 1896, p. 123.
for all his labour of spinning and weaving, done by himself and his family, he only gets 2-1/2 seers of endi cocoons or about 5 or 6 rupees. But it was assumed that in that case weaving was not to occupy the sole time of weaver's family. But even if he devoted much more time to the work than he does now... he could not finish the spinning and weaving in less than three months.

Majority of the workers in bell-metal, brass, and copper utensils reportedly suffered from the same disadvantages as the weavers, that of being bound to the middlemen and not in direct contact with the market and the actual consumers. In some cases between the mahajans and the artisans there was also a class of middlemen beparis who brought the metal and money from the mahajans and took back the finished article to him. In either case the profits of the industry went very largely to the mahajans and the middlemen beparis. It was estimated that on an average a metal worker did not earn more than Rs. 8 or Rs. 10 per month - which was barely sufficient to meet his livelihood expenses, the depressed ones being more in debt. The average wage paid to the bell-metal worker of Kamrup was Re. 1 per seer of finished articles, whereas the cost of the broken bell-metal was estimated at Re 1 to Rs. 2 per seer, and the cost of fuel came to 10 annas per seer of metal. On an average the net earnings were therefore limited to 5 to 6 annas per day or about Rs. 10 per month. The mahajans

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68 G.N. Gupta, 1909, p. 23.
however reportedly made a profit of over 25 per cent on their money. The finished articles being sold at Rs. 3 (average) per seer, while the worker got only 6 annas per day, the mahajan made nearly a clear profit of 8 annas on every seer of metal that he advanced, even after making allowance for all his incidental expenses.\(^{69}\)

It was thus suggested in the Survey Report of 1907-08 that the most important help the industry needed was "in the direction of readjustment of the relations of capital and labour". Regarding the mahajans dealing in silk trade it was observed that the Marwaris had no interest, "either in the welfare of the weavers, or in the introduction of any improvements in the weaving industry.... The depression of the silk-weaving industry in Assam is very greatly due to the want of capital and credit amongst the weavers".\(^{70}\) The same was held true of the other cottage industries of importance in the region. "If the industry was to flourish the financial position of the artisans were to be improved and they were to be freed from the clutches of the mahajans. It would also be of no use to teach the artisans more improved mechanical methods unless the other conditions improved."\(^{71}\)

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69 Ibid, pp. 40-41.
70 Ibid, p. 39.
71 Ibid.
A Note on the Supply of Labour:

The state of the indigenous industries as it was, or rather the reason for which they could not attract any investor, was attributed by the administrators as well as the planters chiefly to the shortage, dearness and unwillingness to work of the local labour. Since returns from tea were very lucrative, labour for tea industry was procured through means fair or foul. But despite various steps taken by the government, such as repeated enhancement of tax, prohibition of opium cultivation etc., the local labour could not be successfully channellized into the tea gardens primarily due to the very low rates of wages offered by the planters.72 An important factor contributing towards the shortage of labour was the relatively small number of landless labourers in the valley. The statistical account of the six districts of the Brahmaputra valley by W.W. Hunter suggests that except in Goalpara the number of landless labourers was insignificant in the valley. In connection with Nowgong district he observed:

"The Deputy Commissioner states that there is no apparent tendency towards the growth of a distinct class of day labourers who neither possess nor rent any land of their

72 During the early phases wages offered to a tea garden labourer ranged from Rs. 2.50 to Rs. 4.00 per month which later on increased to Rs. 5.00. P. Griffiths, The History of Indian Tea Industry, London, 1967, p. 304.
own, although a few people are to be found in the district who do not possess land, but serve as labourers.

The situation applied to more or less all the other remaining districts too.

Data relating to later years reveal a similar trend despite substantial immigration during that period. Table 9.5 shows the number of agricultural labourers and their proportion to the agricultural population.

The landless labourers formed between 20 and 40 per cent of the total agricultural population in Assam in the beginning of the twentieth century. This was of course higher than the northern provinces. However, the high proportion was due mainly to the presence of large number of tea labourers. It appears thus that if the tea garden labourers are excluded, the number of landless labourers in the Brahmaputra valley would be considerably small.


There were about six categories of landless labourers in Goalpara: (1) 'Chakar' - persons regularly engaged as servants, (2) 'Bandhas' - persons paid in advance, with food and clothes, (3) 'Adhiyar' - Share-croppers, (4) 'Prajas' - cultivating in other's lands with own implements, (5) 'Chukani' - pay rent and also serve the owners on certain days, (6) 'Chakaran' - instead of rent cultivate additional lands belonging to temples.

74 It is evident from the Table that in the beginning of the twentieth century the overall proportion of the agricultural labourers was about 14 per cent in Assam. If, however, the plantation workers are 'deleted' from the list, the proportion of agricultural labourers would stand at mere 2 per cent. S.J. Patel, ibid., pp. 26-27.
Table 9.5

Number of agricultural labourers and their proportion to the agricultural population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population supported 1901</th>
<th>Working population 1921</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1931</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Number in Millions:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar and Orissa</td>
<td>(3.6)*</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengal</td>
<td>(1.4)</td>
<td>(3.4)</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Total**           | (5.8)                     | (11.3)                 | (6.5) | (9.0) |}

| **B. Proportion in Per Cent:** |
| Bihar and Orissa    | (14.0)                    | 24.1                   | 26.0 | 35.2 |
| Bengal              | (4.8)                     | (10.0)                 | 17.7 | 33.2 |
| Assam               | (15.2)                    | 13.0                   | 19.9 | 22.2 |
| **Total**           | (9.6)                     | (16.3)                 | 22.1 | 32.9 |

* Figures within parenthesis are under-estimates.

**Source:** S.J. Patel, *Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan*, Bombay, 1952, Table 3, p. 26. Due to the nature of data it is not possible to make an accurate estimation of the actual number of agricultural workers for 1901 or 1911. However there was an obvious increase in the number in the later years.
The recruitment of labour for the tea industry in the initial phases was confined mostly to Chhota Nagpur, Ghazipur, Benaras and Bihar. The results of a survey of the composition of immigrant labourers in Assam conducted in the year 1901 are given in Table 9.6.

Tables 9.7 and 9.8 show the approximate wages received by different types of workers in the Brahmaputra valley districts.

Table 9.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts of Recruitment</th>
<th>Number of Labourers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranchi</td>
<td>91,794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manbhum</td>
<td>69,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazaribagh</td>
<td>68,772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singhbhum</td>
<td>12,927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santhal Parganas</td>
<td>13,237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnapore</td>
<td>17,923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sambalpore</td>
<td>9,437</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It has been observed that the 'high rates of wages now ruling (1888) in Assam are at the same time one of the best evidences of the ease and comfort with which the ryot can
Table 9.7
Wage Received by Different Workers in the Brahmaputra Valley

(a) Monthly Wages Received till 1860 (in Rs.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Goalpara</th>
<th>Kamrup</th>
<th>Darrang</th>
<th>Nowgong</th>
<th>Sibsagar</th>
<th>Lakhimpur</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coolies/</td>
<td>3.00 to 4.00</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.88 to</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ordinary day labourers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural daily labour</td>
<td>3.00 to 4.00</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>in kind</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>12.00 to 15.00</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.00 to</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricklayer</td>
<td>12.00 to 15.00</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.00 to</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiths</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.00 to</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(b) Monthly Wages Received between 1860 and 1876

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Goalpara</th>
<th>Kamrup</th>
<th>Darrang</th>
<th>Nowgong</th>
<th>Sibsagar</th>
<th>Lakhimpur</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coolies/ ordinary day labourers</td>
<td>4.00 to 6.00</td>
<td>6.00 to 7.50</td>
<td>5.63 to 7.50</td>
<td>5.63 to 7.50</td>
<td>7.50 to 7.50</td>
<td>5.63 to 7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural daily labour</td>
<td>4.00 to 6.00</td>
<td>6.00 to 7.50</td>
<td>in kind</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.63 to 7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenters</td>
<td>12.00 av</td>
<td>16.88</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10.00 to 20.00</td>
<td>16.00*</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricklayer</td>
<td>12.00 av</td>
<td>16.88</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10.00 to 30.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>7.50 to 11.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiths</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.00 to 20.00</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The 2nd class carpenters and bricklayers received between Rs. 30.00 and Rs. 40.00 per month.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Able-bodied agricultural labour</th>
<th>Common mason, carpenters and blacksmiths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>15.00 to 30.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>3.00 to 9.00</td>
<td>14.00 to 40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>3.00 to 10.00</td>
<td>12.00 to 60.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>3.00 to 11.00</td>
<td>12.00 to 60.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>3.00 to 12.00</td>
<td>12.00 to 45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>3.00 to 10.00</td>
<td>20.00 to 40.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Prices and Wages in India*, for the mentioned years (Annual Reports), Dept of Statistics, Government of India, Calcutta.
subsist on his own land as an independent man.... 75 Similar observations or comments were made in almost all the contemporary official correspondences upon the high wages prevailing in the region. However, as it appears this was a relative estimate made with the tea labourer's wages in mind, which was much lower in comparison to wages received by other workers. In the initial phases of the industry, the average wage earned by a tea garden labourer ranged between Rs. 2.50 and Rs. 4.00. 76 In the period of contract, wages were offered on the basis of stipulated daily work at the rate of Rs. 5, Rs. 4 and Rs. 3 per man, woman and child respectively. These rates continued unchanged till 1881. Even in the period between 1873 and 1910, the average monthly wage received by a tea labourer was almost half the amount received by an agricultural labourer. 77 With the beginning of Public Works Department construction works in the 1860s the tea planters started facing competition from the government regarding wages. Whereas in 1864 the Assam Company was paying Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 per month, the government labourers were offered Rs. 7 a month.

The increase in the prices as noted repeatedly by the administrators had a prejudiced emphasis on the rise in

75 Enquiry Committee Report, 1888, op. cit., p. 4.
76 P. Griffiths, op. cit., p. 304.
prices of items which were supposedly produced locally, implying thereby a general condition of ease and prosperity. 78 'It is a curious anomaly to see mustard seed getting dearer, and the oil pressed from it getting cheaper'. This, however, was explained by the same authority in terms of improved manufacturing techniques as well as means of communication in case of the imported items. Also the fact was overlooked that even other than salt, sugar and oil which registered fall in prices, a large portion of the staples e.g. rice, wheat etc. were imported from Bengal and beyond. (The quantity of common rice obtained for one rupee had fallen by 1880s by nearly 40 per cent and that of wheat by 60 per cent which affected prices even of the items produced locally). The high rate of consumption of the imported piece goods too had some bearing on the enhancement of prices. Among other factors contributing considerably towards rise in prices was the deep penetration of dealers and traders in the marketing of commodities. Contrary to official explanation, however, the rise in prices of agricultural products did not indicate better economic condition of the peasantry, the reasons for which have been discussed earlier. It was assumed by the authorities on one hand that the high wages commanded in the region was 'one of the best evidences of ease and comfort of the ryot', on the other, the enhanced wages of the occupations such as

78 Enquiry Committee Report, 1888, op. cit., p. 25.
khansama, sweeper, clerk, munsif, peshkar etc. where local representation was very low were justified on the ground of costlier means of subsistence. 79

In view of the high prices prevailing around the time, the wages offered (Rs. 1-2, and Rs. 2-8 according to age and ability, besides food) 80 do not seem very high. However, agricultural indebtedness, along with the high prices and escalation in revenue demand forced the local labour, otherwise trained in specialized crafts, into becoming traditional agriculturists or resorting to non-tea sectors as occasional labourers. It is worth noting here that in contrast to the tea entrepreneurs 'the Kayas (Marwari traders) find no difficulty in obtaining local labour either for transporting their goods or for their household necessities', 81 since the 'Kayah' or the Marwari trader as the money-lender no doubt bound the worse off peasants to them but at the same time offered some sort of security over the low-waged tea garden work or the well-paid but random work of the mason or the carpenters. Under the circumstances, it was but natural that the Public Works Department had to offer higher wages to the labourers to ensure service in the construction schemes.

79 Enquiry Committee Report, 1888, op. cit., p. 25.
80 Ibid, p. 16.
31 Ibid, p. 20.
Concluding Remarks

In conclusion it may be observed that stagnation was the main feature of domestic industries of the Brahmaputra Valley in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The expansion of domestic markets was mainly in order to accommodate the increasing imported articles at the cost of the local crafts. The few industries which continued production on limited scales (e.g. textiles, metal manufacturing and lac), were all subjugated to merchant capital. However, noticeably enough this penetration of merchant capital did not lead to a subsequent growth of capitalistic form of production either. There was no significant urbanisation and detachment of the artisan from agriculture; rather the reverse was the case. Consequently, the lack of organisation of the artisans left them defenceless against the competition from mill-made cheaper products and pushed them further towards agricultural activities. Besides, the comparative advancement of industries in the neighbouring states reduced the export demands in the valley to that primarily for raw materials. Hence to the merchant trader, investment in trade and usury seem to have become more lucrative. Consequently, the peasant-producer remained greatly in the clutches of indebtedness of the merchant-usurer.

Excepting for a few initial plans and proposals, there is not much evidence of any substantial investment actually made by the colonial state at least till the end of the 19th
century, the weaving institution and the emporium at Gauhati having been established only by the third decade of the 20th century. State patronage by the end of the century was firmly channelised towards the tea plantations. Policies like the Charter Act of 1833 had further struck the traditional crafts adversely and as a result the occupational structure underwent considerable change.

Although the methods of production were very simple and limited in scale, indigenous crafts had provided occupation to a large section of the population during the Ahom rule. But after the British annexation of the province in 1826, important industries like gold and silver-washing, iron-smelting, salt manufacturing etc. started declining. By the time a systematic census started (in 1872) the composition of artisanal population had changed a great deal. Persons belonging to certain artisanal groups presumably turned to full-time agricultural occupations while others combined agriculture with other crafts for livelihood.

Lack of adequate investment on the part of the government as well as the private capitalists also contributed towards the decay of indigenous industries. Private investment of any considerable amount was confined to tea industry alone. A considerable amount of capital in the form of merchant capital owned chiefly by the Marwari traders, however, did circulate, though this was invested mainly on advances for ensuring procurement of the items concerned. In the memoirs of Haribilas Agarwala (b. 1842),
we come across some information on sporadic investment in rubber forests (1869) and in saw mills (1883), which met with repeated failures, and were subsequently abandoned. Although there was a visible expansion of transport network in the region, most of it catered to the needs of the tea planters. This lopsided development of transport deterred investment in the industries. The labour force was channelised towards land despite enhanced taxation, as it was more lucrative and perhaps assured more security than occupations in the tea industry which offered meagre wages to the labourers. Hence it appears that it was not only the scarcity of labour, as also the low level of wages, which restricted the supply of local labour available to the industrialists. However, the overall impact of all these developments was seemingly less disastrous in the case of the Brahmaputra valley, perhaps due to the fact that land could still accommodate the artisans, or at least provide them with a part time occupation in agriculture during this period.

82 In 1869 Haribilas took lease of 9 rubber forests from the Government in annual settlement. Though the business proved to be fruitful, it had to be stopped due to disputes with the authorities. Thereafter, on several occasions he invested on the business but could not make much profit. In 1883, he bought a saw mill from an European proprietor of Ballipara-Namgaon Tea Estate, at Rs. 12,000 which was shifted to Tezpur dockyard in 1886 and was finally closed and sold in 1893 along with the machinery at a mere Rs. 2,500. Haribilas Agarwala Dangariar Atmaiyani, 1942, pp. 29 and 45. I am indebted to Professor Amalendu Guha for lending me this rare book.